

TO THE END *of the* EARTH

— ADVENTURES IN MISSIONS —



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CONTENTS

Preface	9
1. Disaster at Sea, Chinese Style	13
2. Korea Kaboom!.....	27
3. Behind the Iron Curtain: Bulgaria	37
4. More Communist Tales: Hungary, Yugoslavia, and Beyond.....	55
5. In the Soviet Union.....	73
6. Land of the Unexpected: Papua New Guinea.....	93
7. Nigerian Adventures.....	103
8. Forbidden Territory	117
Lagniappe: Wild Animal Encounter.....	131
Appendix A: Global Trips	137
Appendix B: Book Translations.....	149



1 DISASTER AT SEA, CHINESE STYLE

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The troubles began as soon as my family and I boarded the Chinese freighter on July 9, 1965, when I was eight years old. It was as if we were the catalyst walking into a situation that reacted when we were added. We planned to voyage to the land of Korea as missionaries. My parents had selected this Nationalist Chinese ship from Taiwan because most of the other ships in the area were docked due to a strike, and we had to be in Korea by the end of August. Besides, we were assured that the ship was just two years old and that it had passenger accommodations, even though it was a freighter. We were all looking forward to a quiet, pleasant voyage to the Orient. As things turned out, nothing could have been farther away from reality than these fond hopes. In fact, what happened exceeded the wildest nightmares of our naïve American minds.

My uncle, a World War II veteran, came to see us off, along with many other family friends and relatives. "This looks like an old Liberty ship from the war," he muttered

Disaster at Sea, Chinese Style

to my mother. We soon found out that the ship was indeed of World War II vintage. The captain hastily explained that *they* had owned it for only two years. We decided that it did not really matter; besides, our tickets were already bought.

We soon found out how well the ship was equipped with passenger accommodations. There was only one passenger other than us. Our family of four, including my five-year-old sister, Karen, would have to share one room. This room was not only small, but it was in the crew's quarters. The captain promised that our food would be cooked American style. The only problem was that the cook was an amateur who had trouble cooking even Chinese food, much less American. However, he did manage to set a world's record in culinary achievement; he made sure there was at least one hair, fly, or other object in every meal. At least his service was impartial; even the Chinese crew complained of his cooking. Added to this, the ship was extremely slow. It was, literally, "a slow boat to China." Our only consolation was that the price was not expensive and that we could have a quiet, if somewhat inconvenient, trip.

After sailing from the original port, New Orleans, we headed for Galveston, Texas, where some cotton was to be loaded. At the port we watched the stevedores as they loaded the bales of cotton and stored them in the hold of the ship. They were impudently smoking in the face of "No Smoking" signs. The captain explained that if he complained to them, they might refuse to finish loading the ship. We soon dismissed this trivial incident from our minds and went ashore to buy folding chairs so we could sit on the tarred deck.

After the stopover in Galveston, we set forth for the Panama Canal. Three days later, disaster overtook us. Here is the way it happened. Dad and Mom were sitting on the deck while I was inside, playing checkers with some of the officers. Karen was also inside, riding on the captain's shoulders and playing with him. She had obviously caught his fancy. The first mate came dashing downstairs from the pilot room and around the deck, and he started exclaiming something in Chinese. The captain heard him and came scooting behind him. Mom rushed to see what the matter was. She found many of the crew gathered together, with everyone scampering everywhere and jabbering rapidly. The sight of them frantically scurrying around was humorous, but there was obviously an emergency. Dad and Mom finally found out what was the matter from a Chinese officer who could speak some English. The ship was on fire! We were trapped on a ship that was on fire. It seemed unbelievable, but there we were, right smack in the middle of a disaster.

A sailor had discovered smoke pouring out of ventilator pipes from the hold. Further investigation showed that the cotton cargo was smoldering and was beginning to break out into a blaze. It was fairly certain that the fire had been started by a stevedore's cigarette butt. The fire had to be put under control immediately because there were many drums of fuel stored directly above the area of the fire. If the fire became too much hotter, the fuel would explode. No one knew the exact extent of the fire, but it was evident that it was very strong. The magnitude of the fire was demonstrated by the quantities of smoke belching out from the openings

Disaster at Sea, Chinese Style

leading to the burning hold. The ventilator pipes and passages to the hold were immediately covered with canvas in an effort to smother the fire.

The fire was rapidly getting out of hand, so the captain decided to evacuate the ship via the lifeboats and to radio other ships in the vicinity to pick us up. The alarm was given. We all donned lifejackets and gathered in groups around our appointed stations. We were to be in Lifeboat Number One. Mom and Dad brought our passports and money from the cabin. We stood there, tensely, trying to avoid showing our great fear. Karen's teeth began chattering. We all felt as frightened as she, but we clamped down on our teeth. Nevertheless, our fear was manifested by our sweaty hands, clenched tightly together. Several of the crew prepared to lower the boats, which were suspended in air above the deck. They began to turn the cranks to which the boats were attached by cables. The boats didn't even budge. The ancient, corroded cables and pulleys were so rusty that they refused to move. One sailor climbed up into a suspended lifeboat, attempting to move it. Despite all the pressure put on them, the cables just whined and screeched. Finally, the crew realized the futility of their actions and gave up their efforts. We were stranded on the ship whether we liked it or not.

The captain told us to move from our room, which was near the area of the fire. We rushed down the corridor, noticing that the paint on the floor was bubbling up. The heat soon became unbearable. We salvaged as much of our belongings as we could, but the clothes in the metal drawers were almost too hot to touch. By snatching at them, we were

able to rescue most and carry them to the upper deck, where our new quarters were to be. The new room was even smaller than our former quarters had been, if that were possible.

To add to our worries, the sea began to get choppy. In a short time, visibility was near zero. A gusty wind began to whip up the waves. When dusk finally came, the brewing storm had begun to unleash its power. It was impossible for any other ship to see us, much less rescue us from the perilous freighter.

That night was one full of despair with little hope to bolster us. We were stranded on a burning freighter loaded with many extremely flammable things, not to mention the drums of fuel, which could easily explode. The sea had become a raging monster, effectively isolating us from outside aid. Our lifeboats had refused to function, and there was not much possibility of putting the fire out. What could we do? Only a miracle could save us.

Karen and I slept on the floor because there were only two bunks in the tiny room. The wind and sea were too rough for anyone to get much rest (or stay in the bunk). The wind was howling and whipping the sullen sea into a furious crescendo. The salt spray frothed against the portholes and even reached the uppermost deck. The churning sea played with the wallowing ship, throwing it around with mighty hands. Dad, in an upper bunk, repeatedly banged his head against overhead water pipes as the ship tossed and turned. Mother later related her battles with the cockroaches that crept on us when we dropped off to sleep.

All that night everyone prayed and hoped that the ship would be able to reach Panama. It was doubtful that

Disaster at Sea, Chinese Style

we would be able to get there in time because the ship was making slow progress fighting the tumultuous sea and the cascading waves. And, as all knew, the fuel barrels were nearing the danger point. Somehow, despite seasickness and anxiety, we made it through the night.

In the morning, we could see the crew hosing the deck with seawater, trying to keep it cool. We also found out that the ship's supply of fresh water had been converted to steam and pumped into the hold to smother the fire. The tar coating the deck melted, and the fifty-five-gallon drums of fuel settled on the hot deck. We waited out the day, our minds in turmoil. The storm continued to rage and vent its fury upon us. Sailors who were veterans of many voyages and storms became seasick. A frightened cook's helper was found huddled in a corner of the upper deck.

No ship appeared on the horizon to help us; we could only hope that the fire could be controlled another day until we were able to reach a Panamanian port. Although it was closer, to go toward communist Cuba was a frightful thought for a Nationalist Chinese captain. By that evening, the wild storm had abated, and the sea had quietened to a dull roar. The fire itself was no longer the main problem, but the danger of explosion was greater than ever.

The night passed slowly. The outlook was still grim, but there was no storm with which to contend. Gradually, the darkness blended into the next day. The captain radioed the port of Cristóbal and related our predicament. He asked for a group of firefighters with equipment to meet us when and if we arrived. For once, the odds were in our favor. In several hours, if our luck held, we would be able to reach safety.